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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the 1980s and the 1990s are likely to be a positive period for Catholic and other forms of private education due to several societal factors: (1) economic trends which question the advisability of total or near-total government subsidy of education: (2) sociological trends which favor the "privatization" of American society, with stress on cultural differences and uniqueness: (3) political trends which move away from central government and toward more emphasis on local and private sector activity: and (4) educational trends including the growing quality and perceived quality of private education and the role of emotion in effective learning. (Author/APM)

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A SECOND SPRING FOR AMERICAN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

by Michael O'Neill

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When we look at Catholic education, we often confine our attention to internal factors such as tuition, enrollment trends, religion curriculum, episcopal support, and lay teachers and principals. In addition to these internal factors, however, there are some powerful societal trends--economic, sociological, political, and educational--which affect Catholic schools and which may make the 1980's and 1990's a highly productive period, a kind of second spring, for American Catholic education and similar forms of private education.

Economic Trends

Quite naturally, we tend to look at education as students and teachers, textbooks and tests, reading and recess. But one can also view education as an economic reality, a $150 billion-a-year industry. Some of that $150 billion comes from tuition payments which private individuals make. As economists have shown and as everyone instinctively knows, education can be a very good personal investment. In general, the more you go to school, the more education you buy, the better job and the higher salary you'll likely have. College graduates earn more than high school graduates; MBA's, lawyers, and doctors earn more than college graduates; and if you have a Stanford MBA or a Harvard law degree, your prospects of a high salary are excellent. There are many exceptions to these statements. Some unionized workers earn more than some Ph.D.'s, and a petroleum engineer or computer programmer with a bachelor's degree earns more than an English literature major with a bache-

lor's degree. But in general, there is a correlation between education and income; for most people, education is a good personal investment.

Education is also a good societal investment. If you teach illiterate peasant farmers to read, they can learn more about agriculture and increase the country's grain productivity. If you train people to be doctors and nurses, they will keep more people alive, healthy and working. If you train scientists and engineers, they will add to a country's economic well-being in a variety of ways. Further, the more educated people are, the more they will add to the gross national product and the more taxes they will pay. In addition, education is a civilizing, taming force and therefore indirectly saves society money. It may cost $2,500 a year to keep a youngster in school, but it costs $25,000 a year to keep him in a federal penitentiary.

It is easy to understand why not only private individuals but governments invest in education. What is not so obvious any more is why our government should spend as much as it does. That it should spend some is clear and no one questions this. But the mix of public and private investment in education is becoming a major policy issue. The government shells out a staggering amount of tax money for education--more than it pays for the military, more than it pays for social security. The question must be raised whether public, governmental investment in education is reaching a point of diminishing returns.

The economists who study educational investment or "investment in human capital" as they call it, have noted that the payoff or rate of return is highest in rapidly developing nations. The money that China, Cuba, and Iran have put into education during the past 20 to 40 years, and especially into elementary education, had a very high rate of return. America in the nine-

teenth century was an even more striking example. It is no accident that mass education in America began in the last century: the economy needed it. The elements of success in the American economic miracle were rich natural resources, a supportive government, a spirit of enterprise, new technologies of every kind, an unlimited labor supply from immigration, and . . . public education. Prior to the nineteenth century, most education was home-based and informal. It took place within the kinship group and the community. This was too cumbersome for the new age of the industrial revolution. The kinship group was stripped down to the more mobile and flexible nuclear family, most of the educational functions of the family were reallocated to schools and the largely informal educational process of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was replaced by the common school of the nineteenth century. The common school was one of the pillars of the American economy. Is it still? Not in the same way, not to the same degree. Economic studies also show that as a society becomes more developed, the rate of return on educational investment tends to taper off, especially when the society's basic goals of literacy, civic allegiance and productivity have been met. In our country, unlike Bangaladesh, people have the time, the money, and the incentives to buy a good deal of education for themselves and thier children. Ironically, precisely the fact that we've done so well makes massive public investment in education less urgent, less productive, less compelling to the taxpayer.

And look at that taxpayer. Compared to the situation one hundred years ago, people today have fewer children, live much longer, and pay out in taxes a much higher percentage of their income. This tends to increase the number and percentage of adults who pay a substantial amount in taxes without having children in school at the same time. Also, the taxpayer one hundred years

ago was paying for the town school, the one down the street. Today's taxpayer has no such sense of psychological closeness to the schools he pays for.

In summary, there are deeply rooted economic reasons which make large-scale government subsidy of education less productive and attractive, since the social rate of return has tapered off and since the people who pay the education tax bill are less and less psychologically involved in whatever payoff there is. It is essential, however, not to view the matter as either-or, i.e., public investment versus private investment. It is precisely because the government heavily subsidizes public collegiate education, for instance, that private investment there has a high personal rate of return. They key social issue is not public versus private investment, but rather what is the best mix. The point remains that total or near-total government subsidy of education has become a very questionable social policy.

Sociological Trends

There is a phenomenon in society, almost like a principle of Newtonian physics, whereby a major social force tends to create a countervailing force. It's an old idea, really: action/reaction, thesis/antithesis, the swing of the pendulum. The Eisenhower doldrums give rise to the Kennedy-Johnson enthusiasm. Campus radicalism breeds campus conservatism. Big government triggers the small-is-beautiful movement. McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bells create a special need for good neighborhood and ethnic restaurants. An unhealthy society full of tensions and air pollution invites jogging and health foods.

One of the most powerful social forces in America is that of cultural homogenization. More and more the 225,000,000 people in America watch the

same TV shows, get the same frizzy hairdos, eat the same standardized foods, wear the same designer jeans, drive the same Japanese cars, dance the same dances to the same songs. But cultural homogenization breeds a countervailing force, the privatization of American society. In Brave New World, Winston and Julia, the two lovers, desperately seek out private spaces where they can not only make love but break the monotonous rules, be different, be themselves, escape the oppressive blandness and sameness of the brave new world. Faced with the overwhelming blandness and sameness of our society, many Americans are searching for privacy, for uniqueness, for color and variety. Examples might include the Whole Earth Catalog, flea markets, peasant costumes and old lace dresses, the restoration of old buildings and old parts of cities; social movements which stress differences and identity such as the Black civil rights movement, the women's movement, the Hispanic movement, the Indian identity quest, gay liberation, the ethnic revival, bilingual education, the alternative school movement; examples from the entertainment industry might include many recent movies that haven't been about ordinary people--Godfather I and II, the Deerhunter, Raging Bull, Resurrection, The Elephant Man, Coal Miner's Daughter, Breaker Morant.

Part of this privatization is religious. American homogenization is almost by definition secularist: bland, neutral, a-religious, and "value-free." The privatization counterforce contains strongly religious elements--prayer groups, Bible reading, charismatic piety, religious efforts directed toward justice, peace, poverty and social/political reform, and the mushrooming of small Christian schools.

Political Trends

We have recently seen the most important political shift in the last fifty years. With all due respect to Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson,

Nixon, Ford, and Carter, American politics during the last half century has essentially been the legacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and occasional opposition to that legacy.

The FDR legacy was that of activist government and charismatic political leadership. It worked miracles during the Great Depression and World War II. Truman continued it, Eisenhower was swept along by it, Kennedy made it into Camelot, Johnson brilliantly lobbied it through Congress. The FDR legacy was particularly strong during the enthusiastic years of the early 1960's, with the Peace Corps, VISTA, civil rights marches, the Voting Rights Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, federal support of science and the arts. No one symbolized the FDR legacy better than John Kennedy, the sun-king, the boy-pharoah, the new darling of the old FDR coalition of working-class Catholics, liberal Jews, Blacks, women, the unions, the poor, the South. They all loved him except, of course, the South. Under JFK and LBJ the FDR legacy reached its zenith.

Then it all came crashing down. Vietnam, Watergate, shocking revelations about the once-sacrosanct CIA and FBI, the fall of Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, the evident corruption of big government, big business, big labor, big church, big anything. All this plus the simple oldness of the idea brought the FDR legacy to an end. It was symbolic that Arthur Schlesinger, JR., who wrote so brilliantly about the FDR legacy and Kennedy's Camelot, wrote in the Nixon years a book called The Imperial Presidency in which he basically warned against giving too much power to a president, to a central government.

During the late 1960's and the 1970's a new political movement started to emerge. Carter had some sense of it, with his new Southern populism.

Jerry Brown will go down as one of the movement's early prophets, or perhaps its Don Quixote figure. Ronald Reagan is obviously the movement's central figure now, although it would be a great mistake to say Reagan is the movement.

The new political movement emphasizes personal and small group values, privacy, individual initiative, limitations on government spending, limitations on government regulation, decentralization of power, lowered expectations, a certain modesty of purpose, a strong commitment to old traditional values. Note that this political mood reflects and reinforces the economic and sociological trends. Together, they make it probable that we will see much more emphasis on private sector activity in all areas of American life, including education.

Educational Trends

About twenty five years ago the official American public school mythology* started to crumble. The first shock was Sputnik although, as someone said at the time, all Sputnik showed about Russia and America was that their German scientists had momentarily gotten ahead of our German scientists. Through the 1960's and 1970's mandatory busing and the resegregation of urban school systems was a continuing crisis for the public school myth: the school was not uniting but rather sharply dividing the community. During this same period, historians, sociologists, and economists were taking another look at public education and sometimes coming up with not altogether complimentary conclusions. For instance, part of the official myth was that the common school was the great stepping stone for economic and social mobility. The revisionist

*"Myth" and "mythology" is used here not in the sense of false vs. true but rather in the anthropological sense of a great emotional, symbolic reality in which the question of logical truth or falsity is not primary.

scholars suggested that often the role of public schools had been precisely the opposite: keeping students in their place, reinforcing the existing social stratification.

Meanwhile, Gallup polls, newspaper columns and editorials added fuel to the fire. Today the myth of the little red schoolhouse, once as sacrosanct as the flag, is under heavy attack.

The crumbling of the public school myth has coincided with the rise of a new perception of private education. With all due respect to Albert Shanker, the basic facts are fairly simple: private schools do a better job than public schools at about half the cost. Achievement scores are higher, discipline is better, value education is clearer and stronger, more satisfaction is expressed by students, parents, and teachers. All this would have been heresy 100 or 50 or even 30 years ago. In 1951 James B. Conant, former president of Harvard, former ambassador to Germany and somehow the last word on American education, declared private schools a menace to a free society. Times have changed.

The most remarkable thing about Catholic schools today is not that they're doing a good job but that the New York Times and the Washington Post think they're doing a good job. Hubert Humphrey once said: "The appearance of power is power." Perceptions are reality in education as in politics. One of the most dramatic educational trends today is the growing perception of quality in private education, at the same time that public schools are being perceived more and more negatively. This is an awesome turn-around; the power of the public school myth has been very great for over a century. Note that this perception factor interacts importantly with the economic factor. Just as, for completely separate reasons, education becomes a less productive

public investment, at the same time government-funded education looks worse and worse, while privately-funded education looks better and better.

Another trend favoring private education is the growing awareness of the emotional content of good education. As Woody Allen keeps reminding us, the only two really important things are love and death. Presidential elections and the gross national product and the Joffrey Ballet and religious garb are all important, yet somehow not finally important. A corollary is that the most powerful, enduring, self-generating things in life are those that are the closest to love and death. McDonald's hamburgers, pornographic movies, and last Thursday's newspaper are very far from love or death, which is why they are so forgettable, so transient, so unimportant. Francis of Assisi, Immanuel Kant, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Madame Curie, and Einstein were self-disciplined people who gave up many pleasures but they were also the ultimate sensualists who wanted only the most intense pleasures--love, creativity, ideas, discovery, the race against death. Love and death; the closer you are, the more you are.

Religion and religious education are self-required to be close to love and death. A good school is an incredibly emotional place, completely unlike a department store or insurance office or bridge party or 10:00 a.m. Mass. People love and hate in a school. They cry and fall in love and have their hearts broken in a school. They learn exciting things, they experience incredible victories. What happens in a school? A lot of love and a lot of death happens in a school. In any school, yes, but much more in a good school and most of all in a good, family-rooted, value-intense religious school.

Why a religious school? Because the people there are dealing with ultimate questions--life, love, death, suffering, sex, intimacy, God. They

may deal with these things awfully as we have often dealt with sex and more often with God, but at least they deal with them. Novelist James T. Farrell, who genuinely hated his Catholic school experience, later went a little soft on the issue and said he thought at least one great lesson he learned from his Catholic school experience was that life was terribly important and the stakes were terribly high: sin and grace, heaven and hell.

Schools must be close to love and death to be fully effective. Imagine a home where everything was cool, correct, objective, efficient, rational--a home where people didn't let themselves go, didn't ever reach out and hug or hit each other. It would be a terrible place to live. Some social settings must be cool and rational, e.g., a plane flight or space shuttle flight. Families and schools, however, cannot be effective by remaining strictly cool and rational. Anthropologist Judith Kleinfeld in her Eskimo School on the Andreafsky, a study of a Catholic boarding school in Alaska, concluded that the emotional content of the school played a major role in its success.

In summary, there are important societal trends which seem to make the years ahead a very promising climate for the development of American Catholic education. Catholic schools have demonstrated for a century and a half that they can survive and even thrive in periods of adversity. Perhaps the question ahead is how well we can capitalize on what should be conditions of prosperity.